

## Take Me Back To Wondaland

Yesterday was just the perfect day to illustrate my life.

I got up in the morning after my third snooze and inhaled the heart-warming aromas of an active kitchen. My mom was cooking for the afternoon meeting we were attending. She had coerced me into driving with her out to Literal Nothing-ville, Wisconsin. Since my dad wasn't going, we drove in his gorgeous Volvo (that will soon be my very own, I'm sure). It's a sleek java-coloured station wagon with cream leather interior. I feel like some sort of contradiction when I drive it. I'm young and playful but the car is elegant and poised. And after picking up another Yoruba mother-and-daughter near our neighbourhood, we drove out of our Madison civilisation. It was a meeting of the EYIWA group. Their goal is to preserve and commemorate the Yoruba culture, one of many originating in Nigeria. A lofty goal, but I think even just the meetings do a good job. A group of Yoruba people in the middle of Wisconsin, coming together with criminally delicious food and a viscerally banterous atmosphere. This atmosphere often gets in the way of the declared agenda, but playful mockery and enjoyment is at the top of the Accidental Wonderland Agenda.

If you can't tell already, this group doesn't get much of anything done, but don't tell them I said that. They discuss agenda items, concerns brought up at the last meetings, and talk about when they will finally launch the project. They've been doing that for about three years now. In order to speed up the process a little bit, my mother came Prepared. She created a one-act play narrating and displaying the naming ceremony of a newborn child. This naming ceremony is held eight days after a child's birth. All Yoruba names are concise sentences usually describing the child's first days or the parent's sentiments. My own names mean "my honour is complete", "I give thanks to the Lord", and "my honour is unique". Pretty cool, I know.

After giving that play proposal, we left the meeting as quickly as possible. It's so easy for these meetings to go on longer than seemingly necessary, and none of us really had patience for that. The drive home was a bit drowsy. I had put on the Algerian Kabyle tunes of Lounes Matoub and the passengers in the back fell right asleep. I understood the occasional French, but not one bit of the Arabic. It created a type of trance, a suspension in time and sentiment.

As the miles passed by, each indistinguishable from the previous, I thought back to the meeting and how I had treated myself to blissful ignorance of the topics discussed in order to sketch out a few dress designs. Once in a while I would show my designs to those around me or run thematic ideas by them. And it just felt natural. It was home. I wasn't one of the small kids playing around outside, I had transformed into one of the big kids playing inside. I was minding my own business, but soaking in the atmosphere and gentle hospitality that my culture never fails to provide for me.

It was nice. It was relaxing. It was a reminder of who I am and what I care about. I never used to understand why birds of a feather always flocked together. Why couldn't they branch out a bit?

Then I realised that they do! They go on adventures with all kinds of different birds but being surrounded by those who intrinsically understand and protect? That's priceless.

When I finally got home, I returned the GPS to its respective car and as usual, transferred a CD or two from the Volvo into my bag. I was just so tired and ready to lie down. I looked up from the car to see a neighbour passing by, glancing my way with a quizzical look. I said "hello" and they murmured back while switching their gaze to the garage to see the other cars. They kept looking while I got the mail, kept walking until they finally lost interest, or decided it would be awkward to keep looking.

It wasn't the first time even that day that I had been stared at by a passing neighbour. It wasn't even a surprising situation. It happens every time they pass. The fascination often amuses me. After all, I've lived in this neighbourhood for over twelve years. It's a nice neighbourhood. The nice type that tells you to cut the grass when it's too high or they'll do it for you (and charge). The nice type of neighbourhood with houses far enough apart to avoid regular interaction. A family-friendly, Middleton, WI-exporting community that really values the colour of the lawns and sophistication of backyard playthings. I fit right in except for the whole "black" thing.

I can do snobbish and spoiled and self-righteous and secluded. That's a specialty of many reared in an upper middle class home. But luckily, I don't have to put forth that much effort into alienating myself. They'll do it for me. With the timid and unsure greetings and the glances from across the street. "Is she just visiting or is this an intruder?" I used to think it was all in my head, but after a lot of unsavoury experiences, I know better than that. No matter how expensive my house, my cars, my jewelry, no matter how many Coach bags I treat like Jansport, no matter how much I turn up my nose, I can still see the assumptions and the confusion. I'll always see the traces and chunks of racism that has been kneaded into the minds and sensibilities of everyone around me.

I see it because I recognise it in myself. I see my own racist tendencies after being reared in the United States. Seeing it in general is heartbreaking but seeing it in myself is disappointing and distressing. It's an ignorance so prevalent, so hegemonic, that even to instinctively rebel against it is to play by its rules.

I used to hate being boxed so much that I wanted to prove "them" wrong. In every way I was discriminated against, I wanted to be a contrasting example. I became obsessed with looking polished. I thought that if I dressed well, they couldn't possibly assume that I was poor! I thought that if I showed them my intellectual prowess, they couldn't assume that I was dense! If I showed my knowledge of power tools, no one could tell me that I was weak and god forbid, feminine. If I spoke of my high-achieving parents, they couldn't possibly assume my home was broken. But the problem was that it didn't work. I started hating myself because of all of the things that allowed me to be placed in these negative and demeaning boxes.

My Wonderland is a magical place. It's a somewhere that not only promotes self-acceptance but

also throws out all social stigma associated with being myself. I am black. I am a woman. I am intelligent, strong, and intense. I eat well, I'm stable and assured. But I'm no longer afraid of showing the sides of me that fit the stereotypes. I speak with slang. I cry at films. I eat badly. I am lazy. I am shallow and dwell on inane things.

I do a lot of things. I am a lot of things. I think a lot of things. Things, things, things! And none of that has any-thing to do with how others want to categorise me. I am just me. I am culturally aware and a spoiled brat. I'm a three-year-old and a forty-year-old. I'm wild and tamed. I'm so many contradicting things. And positive, negative, neutral, I love it all. I love every bump and scar and burn that tells the story of what I've done. I admire every crease and crevice of who I am because that's all I have. I have only myself, only my mind, only my body to take me where I want to be.

The road to Wonderland is a lot smoother when you realise that you deserve to be there.

It makes existence feel like less of a chore. I understand and accept that the culture I was raised in wants to subvert me. I understand that my self confidence issues were the result of carefully engineered Social Expectations and that my inability to love myself solidified me as a non-threat to anyone else's domination. I understand that there's hardly a source to blame, no matter how frustrating that is. But I am also an engineer. And I have engineered surroundings that fit me personally. I can feel at home in a thought. I feel at home in mutual love and acceptance and appreciation. I feel at home in my individuality that is tolerated and celebrated by those who are worth loving.

While cultural comprehension is one of the most helpful tools I have, I sometimes want to go back to the days when I didn't quite notice the stares. I want to go back to before I got hurt by the realisation and acceptance of the fact that even the most well intentioned of people can't grasp the effect of the most prevalent atmosphere they help to create.

I'm an outsider. I'm a foreigner. An elitist. I don't fit neatly into any of the boxes that so inadequately describe humans. That makes me a threat, a source of spectacle, a point of inquiry even after all of these years. That's our culture. Luckily I have another one up my sleeve.

Wonderland is my safe-haven. I've gotten over the idea that my Wonderland could exist physically. It's a realm in my mind. It's a peace and wonder that notes the established norm and gently tosses it out of the window. I'm so much closer every day. The more I accept myself and my body and my mind as my own personal norm, the less it matters how hostile my environment can be.

Hey Social Expectations. You can keep your political correctness and your tip-toeing around an inherent racism and sexism. You can ignore the privilege you have the privilege not to notice. You can villainise and victimise me based on your faulty perceptions. Whatever, do whatever if it makes you happy. You're not invited to Wonderland, and oh boy are you missing out.

Inspired by: Wondaland by Janelle Monae